

**Testimony of
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**Before the Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health and
The Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans
Committee on Resources
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today about the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) efforts to research, monitor, and manage chronic wasting disease (CWD) in deer and elk. CWD is a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE) found only in cervids (members of the deer family) in North America. First recognized as a clinical "wasting" syndrome in 1967 in mule deer in a wildlife research facility in northern Colorado, it was identified as a TSE in 1978. CWD is typified by chronic weight loss leading to death. While there is no known relationship between CWD and any other TSE of animals or people, the Administration believes that meaningful cooperation and coordination with industry, states, and other federal agencies is vital in further addressing this issue.

There are three agencies within USDA currently involved in the study of CWD: first, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), which has the authority to deal with livestock diseases and to manage wildlife damage; second, the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), which is currently conducting CWD research; and finally, the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES), which provides grants to universities to conduct research in areas such as CWD.

Surveillance for CWD has also been a cooperative effort involving State agriculture and wildlife agencies

and USDA. Farmed cervid surveillance has been increasing each year since 1997 and will be an integral part of the USDA program to eliminate CWD from farmed elk and the establishment of a certification program for herds free of the disease. Since 1997, CWD has been diagnosed in 20 farmed elk herds in 6 States: Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and South Dakota. In September of 2001, Secretary Veneman signed a declaration of emergency for CWD, which allowed APHIS to seek Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) funds. Since September, APHIS has received a total of \$14.8 million in CCC funds, which has been used for CWD indemnity payments and testing, disposal, and surveillance costs.

The APHIS indemnity program is voluntary, and producers who choose not to have an eligible herd depopulated are not required by APHIS to do so. Under the program, indemnity amounts are determined by appraisal. At present, USDA is paying up to 95 percent of the fair market value for depopulated animals up to \$3,000 of the appraised value of each animal. Additionally, in April 2002, USDA agreed to buy out and depopulate exposed farmed elk herds in the area of Colorado where free-ranging animals have tested positive for the disease. Elk owners who agreed to the indemnity are allowed to restock their land with only non-cervid ruminants like cattle, swine, and sheep. We will consider requests from other States based on the availability of funding.

One thing has been made clear by APHIS' work in the field: there is a need for more research on this disease. ARS has been conducting numerous research projects regarding transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE), among them several important projects regarding CWD. CWD is more challenging than other TSE research because the disease affects mule deer, white tailed deer, and elk with different pathogenic patterns. Diagnostic testing needs to be tailored for each species. Further, control measures for captive, farm-raised elk will optimally include a live animal test, while free-ranging deer would best be tested by "deer side" screening of hunter-killed animals, which typically number in the tens or hundreds of thousands over a period of a few weeks each fall.

With this in mind, ARS has several ongoing projects including a live animal test for elk, techniques for the detection of the CWD agent in soil and water, and the development of a test that can be used at check stations during hunting season. ARS is also working on the identification of a gene possibly associated with resistance to CWD in elk. The gene is rare in the wild population and CWD prevalence in elk is low. Therefore, an oral challenge trial to determine disease susceptibility is underway.

APHIS' National Wildlife Research Center (NWRC) has also been involved with research on CWD. NWRC is researching ways to identify barriers, repellents, and other methods to keep deer and cattle separated. This research is being conducted to control bovine tuberculosis, but much of the information will apply to CWD. NWRC is also planning construction on a wildlife disease building because of APHIS' increasing involvement in wildlife diseases.

CSREES is addressing CWD through its competitive research programs. The Fiscal Year 2002 National Research Initiative Animal Health program specifically called for research on diseases related to livestock-wildlife interactions. Research proposed under this program is currently under peer-review and awards will be made by late summer. In addition CSREES is supporting a study through the Critical Issues program at the University of Wyoming, which is investigating the susceptibility of cattle to chronic wasting disease. Finally, CSREES is administering a Special Research Grant to Colorado State University for the Center for Economically Important Infectious Animal Diseases to study a variety of animal diseases, including CWD.

USDA is committed to fighting this serious health threat. The President's Fiscal Year 2003 budget reflects this commitment by including increases in funding for APHIS, ARS, and CSREES. The budget request includes an increase of \$7.2 million for nationwide CWD elimination and surveillance activities, which would be directed primarily toward captive cervids; \$8.6 million for TSE research, of which \$386,900 is specifically targeted for CWD; and an estimated \$16.4 million for competitive basic research into the emerging agricultural disease initiative of the National Research Initiative, which would include grants to study CWD and other TSE diseases.

CWD is a disease that crosses State, County, and local boundaries and is present in both farmed and wild populations. Because of this, it is our view that combating CWD must be a coordinated and cooperative effort between USDA, the U.S. Departments of Interior and Health and Human Services, and State departments of agriculture and wildlife.

With that in mind, USDA has already met with its counterparts at Interior in an effort to coordinate the Federal response. USDA and The Department of Interior have agreed to form a Joint Federal CWD Working Group. The purpose of the working group will be to assist the states in a cooperative and coordinated manner. ARS, CSREES and the U.S. Geological Survey are planning to sponsor a meeting in August to discuss CWD research priorities and share information. ARS is also working with several universities, including Colorado State University and the University of Washington, on projects related to CWD. USDA is also talking with the Department of Health and Human Services because of the Department's jurisdictional responsibilities with deer and elk products as feed for animals or human food (including dietary supplements) and cosmetics.

In addition, APHIS continues to work with its counterparts at the State level. USDA recognizes and respects the jurisdiction of States and acknowledges the State wildlife agencies as the lead in CWD in wildlife. When CWD has been found in free-ranging populations, APHIS has assisted, and will continue to assist, the affected States by providing laboratory and diagnostic testing support and by assisting with CWD surveillance activities. APHIS has also provided support to Wisconsin and Colorado in harvesting deer and elk for further sampling after new finds in wildlife. An APHIS epidemiological team has worked with Wisconsin's State Veterinarian to investigate the outbreak there. A report on the team's work is currently being compiled.

In conjunction with the States and industry groups, APHIS is developing a nationwide program to eliminate

CWD from farmed elk. The Agency will soon issue proposed regulations for this program, which, if finalized, would require that all captive cervids be enrolled prior to interstate movement.

We look forward to continuing our work on CWD with our Federal and State counterparts and are committed to decreasing the occurrence of this disease in free-ranging and farmed deer and elk populations. Thank you again for this opportunity. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.